

GOD IS THE BEYOND IN THE MIDST OF OUR LIFE

By Rev. Edwin Lynn

We all have early memories of our thoughts about God. My own include memories of attending Sunday School at the Center Congregational Church in Manchester, Connecticut. As I remember it, the emphasis was mostly upon Jesus, who was portrayed as a very kind and loving man who took care of animals and children. In the church school, there was a general acceptance that God existed, but there wasn't much emphasis placed upon it.

Eric Marshall's book, "Children's Letter to God", has some typical and humorous examples of children's views of God.

"Dear God,
Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you better do something quick...Terry and Ann

Dear God,
I don't think you were listening when I prayed to you to make me a better football player, so I am sending it by way of mail so you can read it when you have the time. Here is my picture so you will know who I am...So long, Bobby

Dear God,
What is it like when you die? No one will tell me. I just want to know, I don't want to do it....Your Friend, Mike.

These simple prayers express basic questions. Is God real? Can we petition him or her? What happens after we die?

Another kind of childhood belief is expressed by Charles Stephen with his youthful concern about going to bed at night. He writes:

"The fear of God entered into me when I went to bed each night. I didn't have much of an idea of what God was, or, rather, what people about me thought God might be. But for my childish mind, a being that could see all and was everywhere was disturbing, I have a distinct memory of fearing the God who lived in the darkness under my bed and who was capable, and my fear said likely, to reach out and grab my ankle as I got into bed. So, I develop the practice of putting out the light on the opposite wall, taking one quick step and then a gigantic, horizontal leap (it had to be horizontal because I sleep in the bottom bed of a bunk bed) from the wall to my bed, whereupon I was instantly safe and secure. For some reason, the God who lived under my bed and who was trying to grab my ankle was incapable of or uninteresting in bothering small boys once they had safely made it into bed and under the covers."

I never had that type of experience; however, I do remember saying my prayers each night with my parents. In those early years, I accepted God with a somewhat benign indifference. In high school, I began reading a variety of books and became a self-styled intellectual. I was questioning everything. I began visiting other churches including Christian Scientists and the Unitarian Universalists. Later when I

attended Syracuse University in the 1950s, a time when students went to the campus chapels on Sunday, the school had a very famous chaplain. I still remember him now, Dean Noble, a marvelous man, who seemed to know everybody on campus. In my sophomore year, I was so inspired by him that I went to regular mid-week chapels as well as Sunday morning services. But in the context of an intellectual community with more reading and growing cynicism, in a bout a year I shifted to the other extreme and became an atheist. I even thought, but fortunately never did, of going back to my hometown Congregational minister and telling him what a sham I thought his whole church was. David Rankin summarizes these feelings well in speaking about his own experience at a similar period in his life. He writes:

“I total rejected the idea of God as incompatible with the real world. When asked to express my beliefs: I could easily quote Sigmund Freud to the effect that God is purely a creation of the human imagination, a childish fairytale for the ignorant and confused. I could blithely quote Bertrand Russell to the effect that God is a referent which is no longer credible in light of scientific, philosophical and historical studies. Or, I could passionately quote Karl Marx to the effect that God is a tool of the wealthy and the powerful, which is used like an opiate to keep the poor in bonds of slavery. My heavens! I was smart! Those were the sure and confident years.”

I continued my religious search. I read, discussed and reflected. I modified and tempered my views. After a career in architecture, I went into the ministry, but unlike many of my colleagues in other denominations it was not because I had a call from God, but it was because I wanted to work with people. I went to Thomas Starr King, the Unitarian Universalist theological school on the West Coast. Strange as it may seem, we didn't talk much about the Old and New Testament or God, but remember that this was California and it was the early 60's. Times were different. Everybody in the school was planning to change society. Religiously we believed, although it was not spoken about very often, what we were going to create a fourth religion. In addition to Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism, we were going to create a new humanistic faith. All we needed to do was to release ourselves from the shackles of the past.

There have been many changes since those days. We did not create a fourth faith. Unitarian Universalism still continues as an extension of the Judeo-Christian tradition. We have many differences with orthodoxy, and they with us, but we are basically the liberal extension of the Protestant Reformation. We test the boundaries of what religion can be. This creates a variety of dichotomies within our denomination. Much of the Unitarian Universalism in the West is still as liberal as it was in the 60s, but much of the East has become more traditional. Harvard and Andover-Newton, our East Coast theological school have many students who are attending and have more traditional beliefs. When I was a member of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee interviewing candidates for the ministry, I was surprised at the constant use of traditional religious language, especially in the East, by these young people. In the interview process, we found that their beliefs were a sustaining part of their lives. These differences are part of some of the current controversy related to the proposed denominational By-Law changes. Other denominational changes indicating a more traditional theology are the findings of the denominations Religion Education Study Committee, which recommend three separate curriculums for our churches including the humanists, the theists, and the Christians. I am currently chair of the denomination's Pamphlet Commission. We just revised a pamphlet "Views of God" [see at bottom], which includes seven different views of God from Unitarian Universalist lay people and

ministers. This new pamphlet is much more supportive of God language and beliefs than the one we published ten years ago.

Perhaps the clearest indicate of these changes to the more traditional views is a survey that was taken in 1967 and repeated in 1980. One multiple choice question, among many, was "What is your definition of God?". The 1967 survey had the following responses:

- 44% - "God may appropriately be used as a name for some natural processes within the universe such as love or creative evolution"
- 28% - "God is an irrelevant concept, and the central focus of religion should be on man's knowledge and values."
- 23% - "God is the ground of all being, real but not adequately describable."
- 3% - "God is a supernatural being who reveals himself in human experience and history."
- 2% - "God is a concept that is harmful to worthwhile religion."

The 1980 survey showed that the views of God had changed considerably. The responses indicated that the mainstream remained at almost the same percentage feeling that "God represented natural processes". The percentage also remained constant of those who felt God was a "supernatural being" or that the concept was "harmful". However, there was a major reversal between those who felt that "God was an irrelevant concept" and those who felt that "God was the ground of all being, real but not adequately describable." When we took the same survey in our church in 1981, the statistics were exactly parallel to those in the 1980 survey. Our country and our denomination have gone through a phase in which many considered God dead. Now he or she has returned, which is reminiscent of the bumper sticker, which of course comes from California, "God is back and is she mad."

In many Unitarian Universalist churches in the 1960s and the early 70s, the ethical and political orientation religion was pursued as far as it could go and still have us remain a religious organization. At the present time, there are many factors influencing society. Economic difficulties and realities have fostered more conservative attitudes in politics and religion. There has been a return to other dimensions of religious life that balance social involvement. In some ways, social concerns are of greater importance in these difficult times than they were in the past, but churches are more aware that they also need to provide for the expression of beliefs, sacraments, prayers, support, community and spiritual life.

Not long ago, I led a discussion group meeting on the topic of God. It was not a big group, and it was probably more conservative in its interpretation than the church as a whole. It was a brave group. We came through a very cold night and bad driving conditions to get together. We found during our preliminary discussion that we were very intellectual but inevitably, perhaps because it was a small group, we began to talk about important events in our lives, past and present, and how these related to our feelings about God.

Our discussion was reminiscent of the topics raised by Rabbi Harold Kushner in this book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". The rabbi makes the distinction between God as cause and God as cure. He writes, "Learn to live, sustained and comforted by the knowledge that the earthquake and the accident...are not the will of God, but represent that aspect of reality which stands independent of His will." Woody Allen says the same thing in his own caustic style, "If it turns out there is a God, I don't think he is evil. I think that the worst that could be said about him is that he is an underachiever."

According to Rabbi Kushner, God is not all powerful and therefore not all responsible. When bad things happen, they are the result of the natural forces in our world, but it is God who inspires people to help in these times of need. God is not the cause of the problem but he can be a part of the solution. The Rabbi says, "Human beings are God's language."

The more our discussion group talked, the more it became evident that the individuals in the group had shared many experiences. We have searched for meaning in our lives. We have need of strength in times of difficulty. We have searched for a unifying principle that makes sense, not only intellectually, but is also meaningfully intertwined with our daily existence. We talked about the simple kinds of pleasures and depression we can have during a typical day, and how these influence our larger sense of purpose and meaning. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "God is the beyond in the midst of our life." The more we talked, the more I realized that we shared similar experiences, and had common questions, but what distinguished the differences in our beliefs was how we wanted to express our personal answers. In other words, there was a commonality in our experience but uniqueness in our expression.

There are many people in society who avoid questions about God and meaning. They think it is irrelevant. They ask, what's that got to do with paying the bills, or they may accept the easy answer. They go to church, but they don't really believe. They rationalize that it doesn't matter how they really feel or think as long as they are comfortable. As Unitarian Universalists, we do not avoid the questions. We talk about them with an openness that we take for granted. We talk about God knowing there are differences among us. On any Sunday morning, you could be sitting next to an agnostic, an atheist, a theist, a humanist, or a Unitarian Universalist Christian, and it is alright. We don't need to try to convert or save or ostracize each other. Some members we don't know how they feel for they believe that their beliefs are a personal matter and we respect their individuality. Our thoughts and approach to God reflect the freedom and honesty that are a part of this church. We can think honestly about how we feel and express our viewpoint knowing it will be respected. One of the best comments that I have heard about our church was in a gathering a few years ago. A new visitor said what they found fascinating about the church was there was so little talk about God, and yet his presence was in the church more than in any other they had ever been a part of.

Beliefs about God encompass so much of our living.

In the god of creation are the beginnings of the universe, the earth, and human life.

In the god of history are the continuing traditions of Western culture.

In the God of conduct are the influences of the standards of good and evil in our society.

In the God of an after-life is the question of human purpose. This one word presents all these concerns. This is very appealing, but it is also a weakness because the term carries so much it is subject to a wide range of interpretations. In the discussion, some felt that there was too much confusion with the definition. No one in the room believed in an anthropomorphic God, but some felt that the term should be clarified when used. Others felt it was easier to avoid the problem by not using the word. Some were concerned that individuals use God as someone to be petitioned to for intervention in their particular behalf. Others feel there have been many abuses in the past in the name of God. Terrible things have been done in the world in the name of religion. The crusades and the Inquisition are examples from the past. The fundamentalists are an example from the present with their simplistic,

often arrogant, self-righteous views of themselves and their policies. Some say it is the people that have the problem, not God. How we view the dilemmas of these issues relates to both our personal needs and what we want to emphasize in terms of how we see the positive and negative in God references.

I do not use the term very much on Sunday, in part, because the word is easily confused with other traditions in which God is being petitioned to and asked for special favors. That is not true in all churches. There are many with a devout belief that is strengthening and important; I respect their belief. It can give these people a sense of compassion and meaning in their lives. I know when I meet more orthodox ministers, who use traditional language, I am sympathetic and listen openly, for I know we are talking about similar things with different expressions. I am also sympathetic when members of this church talk about their feelings related to God. I truly respect their viewpoint. In person ceremonies, such as a funeral, I refer to God, the larger presence, and talk about spiritual life. The term "God" poetically expresses the language of the heart and of the spiritual in our lives.

Charles Stephen writes:

"There is no need to fear such a word, used with care and a sense of humility and a sense of poetry, and an awareness that it, like other immense words of our lives, such as love, may not always have to be exactly defined, only felt. And if the word is not felt, the mystery and the wonder, the grandeur of existence, the good fortune that we are here at all can still be felt. Perhaps it needs no name. The name is given; let us have no fear that 'God' is the name."

Within our own church members hold many different beliefs. They are all sincere. I want to tell you my beliefs. They are not the church's; they are my own. When I refer to the spiritual, I could say God for the terms are interchangeable.

- I believe there is a spiritual presence in which we all dwell.
- I believe that the world and universe did not begin in the usual sense of beginnings, but has always existed in the form of matter and energy.
- I believe that humankind since the beginning of time has searched for the spiritual and tried to exemplify it in religious form.
- I believe that religion tries to encompass the spiritual life in ways that are an inspiration to its adherents. Some of the greatest art and most compassionate acts of caring have been inspired by religion.
- I believe that we need to get in touch with our inner selves, our own spiritual presence, so that we may find the energy that can be a source of joyful peace and strength in times of need.
- I believe the spiritual presence is the essence of love between persons.

We each have had our own experiences of God during our formative years – some have been afraid, some infatuated, and some antagonistic. You know your own experience. In our theologically liberal denomination, there has been a tempering of viewpoints about God. More members find the concept relevant. Each of us much face difficulties and create meaning from the fabric of our daily lives. A true and sustaining belief is interrelated to these everyday needs. Some find God an important unified force in their lives. Others are unsure, agnostic, finding the term too vague and abuses of it too great. What is significant to us as a church is that we can honestly and freely affirm our particular view and that belief will be met with more than tolerance, but with understanding and respect. This church is large enough for all, for each of us, as we "live with the beyond in the midst of our lives."

VIEWS OF GOD

“God is the beyond in the midst of our life.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“God is within the ground of our being.” – Paul Tillich

“God is the sum total of human idealism.” – John Dewey

“I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least.” – Walt Whitman

“I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” – Jesus

“To me, I confess, it seems a very considerable thing to believe in God: difficult indeed to avoid honestly, but not easy to accomplish worthily, and impossible to compass perfectly; a thing not lightly to be professed, but rather humbly to be sought; not to be found at the end of any syllogism, but in the inmost fountains of purity and affection; not the sudden gift of intellect, but to be earned by a loving and brave life.” – James Martineau

“The term ‘God’ for me, does not mean a Supreme Being, a Divine Person; it is rather my affirmation that the universe and life have some principle of coherence and rationality. It epitomizes my faith that, despite the tragedies of personal life and the unavailability of any final answers, life is tremendously worth living, and the heart of reality eminently sound.” – Arthur Foote

“Someday after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we will harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire.” – Teilhard de Chardin

“In each of these moments, I experience a vitality at the heart of existence which encompasses all. I am part of a gigantic process, sometimes glorious, often destructive. Although ultimately it will destroy my personal identity, I sense that nothing is even finally lost, that every act is linked inextricably into the great chain of being. Whatever we call God exists for good or ill within myself. I am free to choose, yet I am responsible for all.” – Richard A. Kellaway

“God, in spite of re-interpretations, carries too much of the past with it. God, for me, is a word which has outlived its usefulness, and its re-interpretation no longer seems worth the effort. The concept of God is not easily integrated with the information that is constantly flowing to us from the researcher and thinkers of the modern world.” – Paul H. Beattie.

“God is Inspiration. God is the image of perfection, wisdom, holiness, and wholeness ever before me toward which I must stretch and direct my soul. The God who calls me is not so much a god of tradition or a god of laws and contracts or a god of rhetoric, but rather a god of essence and presence. This God, while seeming to touch us from a realm beyond, lives right at the heart of all that is most alive in the human experience. Seeing past the separations that divide us is moving closer to the healing light that is the unity of God.” - Marni Politte